

Review of *The Gentrification of the Internet: How to Reclaim Our Digital Freedom* by Jessa Lingel (University of California Press)

by Alyce Currier | Issue 11.2 (Fall 2022), Book Reviews

ABSTRACT What could we discover about the forces shaping the internet, and what could we learn about how to fight back against those forces if we committed to the metaphor of gentrification? In *The Gentrification of the Internet: How to Reclaim Our Digital Freedom*, Jessa Lingel shows that gentrification can be a useful lens through which to expose how power and class play out in online space. In a moment of increasing techno-skepticism, *The Gentrification of the Internet* offers a starting point for action, grounded in the reality of urban gentrification activism with proven results.

KEYWORDS technology, media, urban, gentrification, internet, digital media, online culture

The Gentrification of the Internet: How to Reclaim Our Digital Freedom. By Jessa Lingel. Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2021. 168 pp. (hardcover) ISBN 9780520344907. US List: \$19.95.

Comparing shifts in the internet to urban gentrification might seem like a stretch, but the internet's role in our culture and livelihoods is only increasing, and so are the stakes of those shifts and their impact on human lives and culture. In 2016, the United Nations declared internet access a basic human right,¹ alongside housing, education, and the ability to participate in the cultural life of one's community²—rights all potentially impacted by gentrification.

Jessa Lingel isn't the first to make a connection between gentrification and the internet. Writings on the digital divide have long explored the ways that inequality plays out online. In 2013, danah boyd compared the migration of users from MySpace to Facebook to population shifts in cities, specifically white flight, in the United States.³ Authors like Lisa Nakamura, Jackie Wang, André Brock, and Ruha Benjamin have written at length about how race (an important consideration in any account of gentrification) and technology intersect.⁴ Others have explored how the internet and tech culture shape cities. For

example, Sharon Zukin wrote that the participatory discourse of the internet “forms our social imaginary of the ‘authentic city,’ including the kinds of spaces and social groups that belong there.”⁵ More recently, Shannon Mattern argued that conceptualizing and measuring urban environments the way we do computers robs cities of their richness.⁶ Other accounts, like Joanne McNeil’s *Lurking*, have traced the commercialization of the internet and its impact on users.⁷

The Gentrification of the Internet challenges activists and others to consider what we could discover about the forces shaping the internet and what we could learn about how to fight back against those forces, if we committed to gentrification as a metaphor for the evolution of online platforms. Lingel hopes to “show how gentrification gives us a vocabulary for thinking about the internet’s politics and inequalities” (17). Lingel provides an approachable, succinct overview of how the forces of displacement, isolation, and commercialization play out across digital culture and infrastructure, the technology industry, and urban space. Whether or not the reader fully buys into the metaphor, the book offers a compelling, interdisciplinary examination of the many intersecting forces shaping the internet today.

Lingel explicitly states that *The Gentrification of the Internet* is not intended for other researchers who study the internet, but for “activists and ordinary internet users who want to think critically about the internet” (19). She avoids jargon and footnotes, and includes a glossary. Lingel introduces and intertwines concepts from varied fields and focus areas—for example, key terms from the study of gentrification and turning points in the history of the internet—without overloading the reader. She substantiates her arguments with a combination of personal experience and research, quantitative evidence, and examples and anecdotes from both news media and scholarly sources. Most audiences will find something new, even if some of her case studies, history, and statistics are familiar. For those newer to the study of the internet, Lingel’s engagement with her interlocutors such as danah boyd, Zeynep Tufekci, Finn Brunton, Helen Nissenbaum, and Tim Wu plants seeds for readers to dig deeper.

After introducing the key concepts of displacement, isolation, and commercialization in Chapter 1, Chapter 2 highlights how inequality can be exacerbated both *between platforms*, when competing platforms are displaced by another that comes to dominate the online landscape (22), and *within platforms*, when a platform incentives or rewards some groups of users over others (23). Lingel offers three case studies of platforms exemplifying the kinds of online communities that were “left behind” or displaced by Facebook. *Body Modification Ezine* (BME) and Tumblr represent “an older ethic of digital culture . . . that believed that the internet should be weird, that it’s okay for people to be anonymous online, and that community is more about people than profits” (33). Today, these platforms, largely

driven by subculture, could be described as online “ghost towns” (32), and their trajectory “shows us what we stand to lose as norms of digital culture skew to the mainstream” (33). Later on, Facebook’s battle with drag queens over its real name policy demonstrates a turning point, where users’ real identities can become directly linked with practices like “digital redlining,” which Lingel explains can include the practice of biased advertising based on users’ personal information and which has been directly linked to urban gentrification (35–39). Lingel’s prior work with the drag community, with body modification enthusiasts, and on Craigslist adds personal fervor to these accounts of the pre-gentrified internet.

Chapter 3 focuses on “Big Tech,” the corporations driving both online and urban gentrification, and the ways in which finance culture has been infused into Silicon Valley. The case studies in this chapter vividly illustrate how “Big Tech mostly pays lip service to . . . countercultural values while displacing the communities at its core” (51). For example, a group of Dropbox employees wearing branded T-shirts kicked a group of local youth off a soccer field because they had “reserved” the field through an app (50).

Lingel acknowledges that a single book can’t do everything. She is conscious of her own role and positionality with regard to gentrification, as a “White, cis, college-educated woman” who “currently lives in a historically Black neighborhood in South Philadelphia” (20), and acknowledges that there is room for others to examine this topic further as a global phenomenon outside of the United States, where her account focuses. There is also the question of whether the metaphor fundamentally works at all: *was the internet ever really ungentrified?* “The short answer is, no,” Lingel writes. “There was no golden age when the internet was blind to race, class, and gender, no magical era when communities could thrive without corporate interference and a push toward profits” (15). A brief history of internet infrastructure in Chapter 4 acknowledges the role of the military and corporations in shaping the internet from its earliest days. The early internet “involved open collaboration between the government, industries, and university” (77). As the internet grew, the need for top-down organization became evident, eventually leading to a major turning point in 1991, when a ban on commercial internet service providers (ISPs) was lifted. This led to greater internet use across the United States, but also means that today, “a tiny number of players wield incredible control over the infrastructure of the internet, with minimal interference for the internet and decreased benefits for consumers” (81). Chapter 4 focuses on demystifying infrastructure, positing that “demanding change starts with understanding how technology works, who owns it, and how it’s regulated” (71).

Chapter 5 focuses on resistance and offers suggestions for resisting algorithms, crafting new narratives for success in Big Tech, considering the impact of technology on our neighborhoods and communities, and pursuing regulation. A list of resources and activist

organizations is included at the end of the book for readers to follow up and continue this work. Lingel herself is an activist who has closely researched those on the margins of the internet, and the royalties from the book are being donated to the Tech Learning Collective in NYC and the Women's Community Revitalization Project in Philadelphia. Throughout the book, Lingel highlights ideas and practices from activists as well as academics: "Antigentrification activism . . . shows us the need for action at multiple levels: legal action, corporate pressure, demands for local legislation, and direct action" (103).

Reflecting on the central concept of the book, Lingel notes that "a metaphor is only as valuable as its analytical payoff, meaning that it is useful as long as it helps us to think about a phenomenon in a new way" (17). Physical space and online space are interconnected—what happens in one inevitably feeds into the other. Even if we don't believe online shifts map perfectly to the metaphor of gentrification, Lingel shows that gentrification can be a useful lens through which to expose how power and class play out in online space: for example, the way that corporate influences displaced the most devoted users within Tumblr, or how in-person microaggressions within Big Tech companies can create unwelcoming workplaces, impacting the technology that is built. In a moment of increasing nihilism about the role of the internet and the ability of regular people to resist a descent into a technology-driven dystopia, *The Gentrification of the Internet* offers a starting point for action, grounded in the reality of gentrification activism with proven results.

Notes

1. Nicholas Jackson, "United Nations Declares Internet Access a Basic Human Right," *Atlantic*, June 3, 2011, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2011/06/united-nations-declares-internet-access-a-basic-human-right/239911> < <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2011/06/united-nations-declares-internet-access-a-basic-human-right/239911/>> . ↩
2. United Nations, "Universal Declaration of Human Rights," United Nations (United Nations), accessed January 21, 2022, <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights> < <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>> . ↩
3. danah boyd, "White Flight in Networked Publics: How Race and Class Shaped American Teen Engagement with MySpace and Facebook," in *Race After the Internet*, ed. Lisa Nakamura and Peter Chow-White (New York: Routledge, 2013), 209–28, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203875063-16> < <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203875063-16>> . ↩
4. Lisa Nakamura, *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2007); Jackie Wang, *Carceral Capitalism* (South Pasadena, CA: Semiotext(e), 2018); André Brock, Jr., *Distributed Blackness: African American Cybercultures* (New York: New York University Press, 2020); and Ruha Benjamin, *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code* (Cambridge, UK; Medford, MA: Polity, 2019). ↩
5. Sharon Zukin, *Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 27. ↩
6. Shannon Mattern, *A City Is Not a Computer: Other Urban Intelligences* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021). ↩

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Alyce Currier is currently enrolled in Pratt Institute's MS in Information Experience Design, expected to graduate in 2023. After studying sociology and media studies as an undergraduate, they spent the last decade working in the tech industry. With a critical but optimistic eye toward technology, they are particularly interested in exploring what it looks like to build strong, intentional communities and systems of support (both online and offline) outside of corporate control, and in building meaningful connections in an increasingly stressful and exploitative attention economy.

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